

# Mr. Bush, Lean on the Lithuanians

By John B. Oakes

**I**t is all very well for President Bush to warn Mikhail Gorbachev against the use of force in Lithuania. But it would be more to the point right now if he warned the Lithuanians not to push President Gorbachev any further into using it.

If the Lithuanians persist in doing so — and are deceived into thinking that a sympathetic America will continue to support them right down the line — the results could be catastrophic for the Lithuanians, destructive for President Gorbachev and highly dangerous for the United States.

Mr. Bush has repeatedly called for a "dialogue, discussion and peaceful resolution." It won't happen and it won't be helped by yielding to the demands of the extreme right in this country to put all the heat on Mr. Gorbachev and none on the Lithuanians.

Naturally, Americans sympathize with the demand of the Lithuanian people for freedom. Paradoxically, it is Mr. Gorbachev who is offering them and their two Baltic neighbors the best hope for freedom they have

had in many centuries of Russian, Polish, German and Swedish rule. Even in the brief and dubious interlude of nominal independence between the two World Wars, the Baltic states were governed largely by rightist dictatorships; but it was Stalin who finally snuffed out what remained of their freedom in 1940.

Now, thanks to the Gorbachev revolution, the Baltic peoples — Lithuanians, Letts, Estonians — are within reach of that freedom once again. The trick today is not to overreach.

This the Lithuanians are in imminent danger of doing, egged on by such irresponsible tactics as those of Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato of New York. His most recent publicity-seeking trip, this time to the Lithuanian border (diverting attention from the Senate investigation into his ethics), gave ultimate proof of his unlimited capacity to trivialize even the most serious foreign policy issues.

The physical presence of a United States Senator on that border, acting almost as *agent provocateur*, could hardly have failed to rouse false hopes (or claims) on the part of the Lithuanian leadership that they had significant American endorsement of an all-or-nothing stance.

## Vilnius is the main problem.

This is not helpful to President Bush's plea for a "peaceful resolution." Even Senator D'Amato must realize that no head of a great nation could possibly accept instant and unilateral secession of one of its component parts, however illegally acquired.

But he could negotiate its independence, and this is what Mr. Gorbachev, despite much resistance from his own right wing, is trying to do, revising Soviet law in order to do it.

By refusing to accept the slower but surer legal path toward independence that Mr. Gorbachev is clearly offering, the Lithuanian leadership is inviting not only the economic crack-down that has already begun but the possibility of full-scale military repression.

If that happened, everything that has been gained for human rights and civil liberties in the Baltic states

thus far — and a great deal has been gained — would surely be lost.

The repercussions would go far beyond the Baltics. Such a convulsion would inevitably derail Mr. Gorbachev's already too long delayed economic reforms. The probable result of that would be the derailment of Mr. Gorbachev himself.

That is something fervid right-wingers in this country and elsewhere would dearly love to see. They are helping it along by pressing President Bush to take an ever tougher line against Soviet-American economic cooperation.

There is a certain irony here. Until recently, the U.S. was waging total economic warfare and supporting a major military force to bring down the elected Government of a neighboring small country called Nicaragua, where we have even less historic claim to sovereignty — legitimate or illegitimate — than the Russians have in Lithuania.

What the U.S. should be doing in the interest of world peace is just the opposite. A blind policy of retaliation could not possibly help the Lithuanians. It could, however, help destroy Mr. Gorbachev and bring Soviet-American détente to an abrupt and fateful end — a tragedy for us no less than for the Soviets, and a disaster for the world.

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